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Testimony Supporting H.B. 6497, An Act Concerning Educational Stability for Children in Foster Care

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Education Committee Public Hearing
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Senator Gaffey, Representative Fleischmann, and distinguished Members of the Education Committee:

We testify on behalf of Connecticut Voices for Children, a research-based public education and advocacy organization that works statewide to promote the well-being of Connecticut's children, youth, and families.

Connecticut Voices strongly support H.B. 6497, An Act Concerning Educational Stability for Children in Foster Care

1. Connecticut's Children Need School Stability

Foster children in Connecticut are frequently uprooted from their schools when they are removed from their families or shuffled between foster homes or institutions. Although DCF does not keep track of the number of school changes for children in its care, we know from working with youth that five, eight – even ten—school changes are not uncommon.

Frequent school changes are traumatic for foster children. Children in the child protection system already have been traumatized by abuse or neglect in their homes and removal from their families. Uprooting a child from her school community deepens this trauma. Not only does this child lose her parents and possibly her siblings, but she also loses connections to classmates, a favorite teacher, coach, and school activities—the aspects of daily life that create a sense of security, self-worth and belonging.

School disruptions have devastating short and long-term effects on the education of foster children. Abused and neglected youth are particularly vulnerable to school failure,¹ and the poor academic performance of these children contributes to above-average rates of homelessness, drug abuse, and

¹ See Nat'l Working Group on Foster Care & Educ., Fact Sheet: Educational Outcomes for Children and Youth in Foster and Out-of-Home Care, at 2-5 (2007), available at <http://www.casey.org/FriendsAndFamilies/Partners/NWGFCE/> (foster youth score significantly lower on standardized tests than non-foster youth, have a higher chance of repeating a grade, and may have a lower chance of completing high school); Vera Institute of Justice, Foster Children and Education (July 2004), available at: <http://www.vera.org> (compared to their peers, foster children "have poorer attendance rates, are less likely to perform at grade level, are more likely to have behavior and discipline problems, are more likely to be assigned to special education classes, and are less likely to attend college).

unemployment.² Although there are several reasons why foster children are at risk of educational failure, school instability is a dominant factor. Studies have shown that it takes a child approximately three to six months to recover academically from *each* school transfer;³ and researchers from the University of California found that students who changed schools even *once* during high school were less likely to graduate than their peers who remained in the same school.⁴

Not surprisingly, the educational cost of *multiple transfers* is even more devastating. Extensive research links frequent school changes to an increased risk of failing a grade, repeated behavior problems, and dropping out.⁵ For instance, a study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association analyzing national survey data found that children who moved frequently were 77 percent more likely to have behavioral problems and 35 percent more likely to have failed a grade.⁶ (This study controlled for other factors, such as poverty, or living in a single-parent home, and its author, a professor of pediatrics, concluded that frequent moving alone is an "important predictor" of a child's academic performance.)⁷ Another study found that by 6th grade, students who were highly mobile during elementary school had already fallen as much as a year behind their classmates.⁸ Because school performance, including performance in early years, is an important predictor of whether a youth will remain in school or drop out, school mobility has important long-term, as well as short-term, effects. For these reasons, foster care experts have identified ensuring school stability as "*perhaps the single most important*" method of improving educational outcomes for foster children.⁹

School stability for foster children is also important for educators, schools, and other students.¹⁰ High student mobility puts an enormous financial and academic burden on schools and educators. Teachers and administrators must scramble to determine the appropriate education program for each new student, without being able to predict how long that student will remain in the school.¹¹ Students transferred mid-

² See *21st Century Schools Project Bulletin*, Vol. 5, No. 5 (Progressive Policy Inst., Mar. 8, 2005); Steve Christian, *Educating Children in Foster Care* (Nat'l Conf. of State Legislatures, Children's Policy Initiative Publication, Dec. 2003), available at <http://www.ncsl.org/programs/cyf/cpieducate.pdf>.

³ See Inst. for Children & Poverty, *Homeless in America: A Children's Story (Part One)*, at 12 (1990) (suggesting that four to six months are lost per change in school); Casey Family Services, *Voice*, Summer 2007, Vol. 8, Iss. 3, at 5 (citing a 2004 study of Chicago students which found that youth in foster care experience a loss of roughly three months of academic progress with every change in school).

⁴ See Linda Jacobson, *Moving Targets*, Education Week, April 4, 2001, Vol. 20, Issue 29, p. 2.

⁵ See generally the following reports and studies cited therein: Lily T. Alpert, *School Mobility and Issues of Educational Access for Children in Foster Care*, at 6 (School of Family Studies, University of Connecticut, 2005) (citing studies associating "frequent school changes" with (1) "higher rates of absenteeism," (2) "lower scores in reading and mathematics," (3) "increased rates of high school dropout," and (4) "elevated likelihood of retention and enrollment in special education").

⁶ See D. Wood et al., *Impact of Family Relocation on Children's Growth, Development, School Function, and Behavior*, 270 JAMA 1134 (1993).

⁷ *Id.* See also Linda Jacobson, *Moving Targets*, Education Week, April 4, 2001, Vol. 20, Issue 29, p. 2.

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ See Casey Family Programs, *A Road Map for Learning: Improving Educational Outcomes in Foster Care* (2004), p. 9.

¹⁰ See generally Rumberger, Larson, Ream, Palardy, *The Educational Consequences of Mobility for California Students and Schools*, (University of California, Santa Barbara: February 1999), pp.50-61 (discussing in detail the severe negative academic and financial consequences of high student mobility on schools and educators, through school survey data and interviews with school personnel); Hartman, *Students on the Move* (Educational Leadership, February 2006), Vol. 63, issue 5, pp. 20-24 (reviewing and discussing literature showing negative academic, financial and emotional effects of high mobility rates on entire school community).

¹¹ See Mason Burley and Mina Halpern, *Educational Attainment of Foster Youth: Achievement and Graduation Outcomes for Children in State Care*, at 9 (Wash. State Inst. for Public Policy, 2001) (citing studies regarding instability and concluding that "records are often lost or are not transferred in a timely manner, which can result in a delay in student enrollment or difficulties in receiving needed services for special needs students," and "[d]ifferent curricula, standards, and teachers" mean that students may "have

year often must be enrolled in expensive special education programs to catch up with their new classmates.¹² High turnover rates slow down the pace of instruction and lead to behavioral and social disruptions.¹³ Moreover, even the most extraordinary and devoted teachers cannot educate foster children effectively without stability and continuity.¹⁴ For this reason, education experts outside the foster care field recommend school stability for foster children as an important step in improving the educational opportunities of *all* children.¹⁵

2. *A New Federal Law Requires Connecticut to Ensure School Stability for the Children in its Care*

In recognition of the importance of school stability for foster children, Congress enacted the *Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act* in October 2008¹⁶. The goal of the Fostering Connections law is to help hundreds of thousands of children and youth in foster care find permanent families and improve their educational outcomes.

The law *requires* state child welfare agencies to include “a plan for ensuring the educational stability of the child while in foster care.” Specifically, the agency must include assurances that: (a) the child’s foster care placement takes into account the appropriateness of the current educational setting and the proximity to the school in which the child is enrolled at the time of placement; and (b) the state child welfare agency has coordinated with appropriate local educational agencies *to ensure that the child remains in the school in which the child is enrolled at the time of placement, if that is in the child’s best interest.*¹⁷ In addition, the new law provides that reasonable travel costs for the child to remain in his or her home school be subject to Title IV-E reimbursement.¹⁸

3. *Given the New Federal Law, Connecticut Should Act Quickly to Enact Legislation to Ensure School Stability*

Given the federal law requiring school stability, and the devastating effects of school instability on Connecticut’s children, Connecticut should act promptly to enact school stability legislation, such as Bill 5842.

School stability should be ensured, and the costs associated with it paid by, the custodial parent of the foster youth—the State of Connecticut. This avoids putting an unfunded mandate on the towns. The

to repeat material already covered at the previous school” or may “have missed various credits and are behind the rest of the class”); *Highly Mobile Students: Educational Problems and Possible Solutions* (1991) (ERIC/CUE Digest, No. 73), available at <http://www.eric.ed.gov/> (suggesting that high student mobility puts an enormous burden on schools because: (1) services developed for the primary school population need to be adjusted and new students must often be enrolled in special education programs to catch up with their new classmates; (2) attempts to monitor school performance are also hampered by changes in the school population; and (3) record keeping becomes more difficult, placing a greater burden on the teachers and the students themselves to determine the appropriate courses, grade level, and education program for each new student).

¹² *Id.*

¹³ Hartman, *Students on the Move* (Educational Leadership, February 2006), Vo. 63, issue 5, pp. 20-24 (reviewing and discussing literature showing negative academic, financial and emotional effects of high mobility rates on entire school community).

¹⁴ Cf. Mason Burley and Mina Halpern, *Educational Attainment of Foster Youth: Achievement and Graduation Outcomes for Children in State Care*, at 9 (Wash. State Inst. for Public Policy, 2001) (discussing severe challenges of teaching and ever-shifting student body, and the negative impacts of excessive student mobility on teacher morale).

¹⁵ See Hartman, *Students on the Move* (Educational Leadership, February 2006), Vo. 63, issue 5, p. 24.

¹⁶ See H.R. 6893, *Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008* available at <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bill/xpd?bill=h110-6893>

¹⁷ See Section 204, Subsection A of H.R. 6893, *Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008* available at <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/billtext/xpd?bill=h110-6893>

¹⁸ *Id.*

state Department of Children and Families (DCF) already is intimately involved in other aspects of the child's placement. DCF is in the best position to arrange for transportation to the child's previous school district if that is in the child's best interest. Transportation can be provided in a cost-effective manner appropriate for the age of the child. Foster parents or volunteers could drive younger children, while older children could be provided bus passes.¹⁹ The safety of the child always comes first, but the expense of providing private contract transportation for each child can be avoided in most circumstances.

The program is relatively inexpensive and can likely be funded through DCF's current board and care account. Oregon, which adopted similar legislation in 2005, reported that it spent \$210,000 out of existing funds to implement the program for 2005-2007.²⁰ For 2007-2009, Oregon's DHS was given \$375,000 per year earmarked for implementation of this successful and well-received initiative.²¹ Oregon's average daily foster care population in 2006 was 7,734, compared with Connecticut's approximately 5,880.²² Although comprehensive comparative data is not yet available, it is reasonable to conclude that the costs of this program in Connecticut would be relatively modest.

Many challenges that face Connecticut's schools and schoolchildren, particularly low-income children, are difficult to fix. Likewise, improving the child welfare system is inherently a difficult and complex enterprise. However, every once in a while, there is a problem facing foster children and schools that is relatively easy and cost-effective to solve. Unnecessary and costly school transfers for foster children is one such example. We support H.B. 5842, An Act Concerning Foster Placement and Education, because it is a practical and cost-efficient investment in Connecticut's children.

See Oregon House Bill 3075, H.B. 73-3075 (2005).

¹⁸ Oregon is following this model for the provision of transportation. See Oregon Department Human Services, Report to the 74th Legislative Assembly, at 2 (2007).

¹⁹ *Id.* at 4.

²⁰ Email, dated December 7, 2007, from Brian V. Baker, Staff Attorney, Juvenile Right Project, Inc. to Sarah Eagan, Staff Attorney, Center for Children's Advocacy, (on file with authors) (noting that Oregon earmarked \$750,000 for the 2007-2009 biennium).

²² Connecticut averaged roughly 5880 children in care each day in 2006. See Conn. Dep't of Children & Families, Overview, at 22 (2007), available at http://www.ct.gov/dcf/lib/dcf/agency/pdf/about_dcf_presentation.pdf. Oregon averaged 7734 children in family foster care and 10,548 total children in foster care each day in 2006. Or. Dept. of Human Servs., Foster Care 2006, at 1 (2006), available at <http://dhsforms.hr.state.or.us/Forms/Served/DE9607.pdf>.

ADDENDUM: Youth Testimony on Educational Stability

During last year's legislative session several youth associated with Casey Family Services of Bridgeport testified on legislation similar to the language that is currently before you. Due to the difficulties of scheduling, these youth may be unable to attend in-person here today. We have attached their words to our testimony to allow you to see through their eyes the struggle of a young person who is unable to find a stable school environment in the foster care system.

Testimony of Aisha Davis in Support of An Act Concerning Foster Care and Education²³

Good Morning to the Committee Chairs; Thank you Senator Meyer and Representative McMahon, and to all Committee Members for hearing my testimony today.

My name is Aisha Davis, I am a Casey Family Services foster child, and I would like to share my experience on educational instability with you today:

Growing up I image a completely different world than I had, but reality set in that it was not my fault that the adult in my life did not do their jobs. Then I entered what is called "the system" as a number. I was scary, hurt, anger and sad. In which could have been the reason why I change so many different schools.

By the time I was in middle school at age 12, I been to several different elementary schools, but I cant remember them all. The ones I can remember, they are: Blackman, Wilber Cross, Madison, and Webster. The difficult part is that they are in the same city of Bridgeport, CT. I finally settled down I finish my elementary schooling at Bishop Wood. Then I attend Betsy Ross Arts Magnet for my middle school career.

I was smart and could had hang out with any crowd I want to, but it's hard for me to make friends, and the chose I made was to be with the "trouble kids." I now looking back, I did that choice because it seem to be easier to fit in with trouble no matter what school I went to.

When I finally graduated from middle school I was planning to attend Common Ground high school until I graduated. My plans was thrown out of the window when I move to Bridgeport for the second time when I finish up my freshman year at Warren Harding. My past haunted me, I was lonely but I found some of my old buddies so loneliness wasn't long. My freshman summer mover again to Norwalk to attend Brien McMahon. I couldn't at less start school time because had me register at the school that took about a week, when I finish got to the school it was very different than the other two high school I when to. I complain but when I finally got use to the school I move again. I move back to Bridgeport were I thought that was going to Harding, but was send to Central school were I attend to this vary day. Further more by changing schools many different times it have damage me physically and emotionally. Uprooting me from the school every time it's something wrong out of my control it impact is great that it almost like Two ton boulder being drop on you.

In the abundance of schools I went to, there were different expectations in each, and now as a junior in high school, I am not even sure I have the right amount of credits to graduate because they didn't always transfer. The curriculum was different in each school, which caused me to repeat some of the classes I already took.

The effect me in school and out of school it affects my work performance and made expectedly difficult to get accustomed to my surrounding. I strongly feel that moving to different schools have a great deal on the individuals Spirit along with emotional damage and Physical making the person sick. All I want

²³ Aisha's testimony was submitted in support of S.B. 159, An Act Concerning Foster Care and Education, that was heard during a Committee on Children's Public Hearing on 2/28/08. The language of S.B. 159 is similar to the language in H.B. 6497.

is for you to listen to me and understand that it is important for foster kids like me to stay in the same school.

Testimony of Cheniece O'Neal in Support of An Act Concerning Foster Placement and Education²⁴

Hello members of the legislature and thank you for giving me this opportunity to testify on this important topic.

Seven years ago a DCF worker came to pick me up at my uncle's house, where I was living at the time, and told me to pack three outfits but I didn't understand why or what was going on. I just did as I was told and left my uncle's house without returning.

I was taken to the DCF office where I sat for awhile before I was dropped off at my first foster home. I had to adjust to a new community, family and school. I didn't know this home would be a temporary placement, but pretty soon I was moved to a residential facility, where I was able to continue attending my old school.

Less than a year later, I was moved from both the facility and the school to a new foster home and a new school. This new placement lasted only six months and I was really hurt when I had to leave because I really enjoyed living with that family.

I was then moved to another new foster home and another new school, all within a year. Eventually, I was moved out of this home and into a shelter for six months. I was able to stay at the same school, but my grades were slipping because I was not allowed to stay after school to get help, due to my unreliable transportation.

After being with another family for four months and being at my third school in a year, my social worker picked me up one day and returned me to the residential facility where I was previously residing. I had to switch schools again, but luckily it was at the beginning of the school year, and I finished the whole entire year there.

Currently, I am living with my aunt. I was very happy when she asked me to live with her; but it also meant that I would have to change schools again. I really loved Hamden High, where I spent my sophomore year, but I had to choose between a permanent home and the school I wanted.

Most kids don't have to make that kind of choice.

I chose to live with my aunt and had to register at another high school, although, I made attempts to stay at Hamden High School by writing letters to the board of education, my attorney, DCF and Child Advocate.

I know it's hard to follow my story and keep track of all the places I've lived and different schools I have attended: seven foster homes, three residential placements, and one shelter. In seven years, I've also

²⁴ Cheniece's testimony was submitted in support of S.B. 159, An Act Concerning Foster Care and Education, that was heard during a Committee on Children's Public Hearing on 2/28/08. The language of S.B. 159 is similar to the language in H.B. 6497.

attended eight different schools, had five different DCF workers, and three different lawyers.

Moving around and having to re-adjust to environments and people all the time makes it hard to trust people. Whenever I got close to someone and confided in them, something happened - either I had to move away or that social worker moved to a different office, or the foster family decided they didn't want to be foster parents anymore. Whatever the situation was, I still had to constantly re-adjust, and it made life very hard for me.

Could you imagine how hard it is to make new friends, stay on task with school work, and re-adjust to new families and communities each year, when you are constantly being moved from place to place?

If you can't, it sounds pretty tough, right? No matter how many times you go through it, you never get used to it - it's that same horrible feeling over and over again.

I'm here today because I think we need to do everything we can to make things better for kids in DCF care. One way would be to allow youth in DCF care to stay in the same school system they were in prior to another move. It would also be important to have good and consistent transportation to and from school.

I feel very strongly about this topic and will continue to make efforts to change this practice. I have already spoken at a Youth Advocacy Day forum at the Connecticut State Capitol in May of 2007. I let the legislators know that educational stability is critical to a young person's development. I was part of a youth panel who spoke about this issue and also staying connected to our families.

I also shared my advocacy efforts on this matter at the It's My Life Youth Conference in Atlanta, GA in September of 2007. I told youth, just like me, that they too should advocate for what they believe in. I also encouraged them to speak on behalf of other children so their outcomes could be better than ours. I told them not to give up because they may be creating change for children who come after us. I hope that my testimony today will help improve the lives of DCF youth and that our efforts will be rewarded by Bill 159 being passed.

Thank you.

Cheniece O'Neal
106 Atwater Street, 2nd floor
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SUPPLEMENTAL: Youth Testimony on Educational Stability

Testimony of Vanessa Gonzales

My name is Vanessa Gonzalez. I am 21 years old, a proud mother and a full time student at St. Joseph lived in over 20 placements and changed schools more than 10 times. Because of continued disruptions, I struggle with the shame of not being able master basic math principles and study skills. These gaps only furthered my frustration and fear of failure in an educational system that seemingly forgot about me. I still struggle with them daily in my college career. However I persevere because I know the benefits of a four year degree and it is well worth the fight.

Educational stability is one the most challenging problems facing Connecticut's foster youth today. I am here today to speak on behalf of the thousands of youth who don't have a voice, so that this issue won't still be an issue, for future foster youth.

Educational stability is vital to success in school and success in life. The Department of Children and Families offers to pay for college, yet it does not and cannot ensure that the foster youth in their care have the ability to take advantage of this opportunity. Foster youth face many obstacles in their day to day lives that most other youth simply don't encounter. We have to worry about where we are going to live, adjust to new rules, new families, and new communities and on top of that a new school and peer group. A new school is a daunting change in and of itself. Add that to lost transcripts, lack of transportation, learning gaps and little or no continuity or support, you have a recipe for failure. And that is the worst part of it all, that we have smart, creative, hard working youth struggling, not because of their own shortcomings but those of the systems around them. I hope that my words and those of the other foster youth here today have enlightened you to the importance of this issue and that with that knowledge you will make sure that the Department of Children and Families has all the funding they need to provide essential services to Connecticut's foster youth.

Testimony of Dominique Swint on An Act Concerning Foster Placement and Education¹

To the Chairs, thank you Senator Meyer and Representative McMahon and the entire committee on children for having this hearing on an issue that I have lived all my life. .

Hello my name is Dominique Swint, and I am 17 years old. I live in Bridgeport C.T; I am currently a senior at Kolbe Cathedral High School with a 3.9 GPA. I am also the proud president of the Youth Advisory Board of Greater New Haven and one of the foster youth at Casey Family Services. I have been in DCF care for 14 years and I would like to say that I am one of the lucky ones to know most of the ins and outs of the foster care system by advocating for myself.

I am now a senior in high school after being placed in 3 different high schools during my confusing sophomore year. With every different school there were different learning methods each school system uses, different book levels, learning rates, and teacher

¹ Dominique testified on S.B. 159, An Act Concerning Foster Placement and Education, in a Committee on Children's Public Hearing on 2/28/08. The language of this legislation is similar to that of the language in H.B. 6497